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ABSTRACT

The development of adult literacy provision in the United Kingdom from the 1960s onwards can be divided into three parts that correspond to significant shifts in approaches to adult literacy. First, the discovery of adult "illiteracy" during the 1960s led to government grants, a national Right to Read Campaign, and the development of local practice and experience. Second, there was a period of consolidation during the 1970s and early 1980s around the principle of learner-centered approaches, with minimal assessment procedures and central direction, and a growing body of expertise among practitioners who also began to undertake their own action research. The government-funded agency, Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, consolidated and became expert in the production of materials, guidelines for good practice, and small research projects. A membership organization emerged for bridging academic/research and practitioner interests: Research and Practice in Adult Literacy. The third phase, which began in the late 1980s and continues currently, has involved a considerable shift of policy and focus, under pressure from a government concerned with ensuring that education generally responds to national and economic needs. The major finding is that literacy programs, curricula, and assessment should be addressed to the specificity of experience in different places and times. (Contains 82 references.) (YLB)

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NCAL

NATIONAL CENTER ON ADULT LITERACY

# ADULT LITERACY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

## A HISTORY OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Brian V. Street
University of Sussex
Brighton, United Kingdom

**NCAL TECHNICAL REPORT TR95-05**
**NOVEMBER 1995**

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# ADULT LITERACY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

## A HISTORY OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Brian V. Street
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**Abstract**

This report examines the history of the adult literacy movement in the United Kingdom in the post-war period. It briefly locates literacy work in a broader historical perspective, from the Norman Conquest to the "Settlements" movement in the 19th century, and identifies recurrent themes as well as significant points of change. The report then traces three phases in recent work. For policymakers and researchers, the major finding is that literacy practices and literacy needs are multiple and vary according to context, so that single solutions cannot be packaged up and transported to different sites. We need, instead, to address program, curricula, and assessment to the specificity of experience in different places and times. Detailed country accounts of the adult literacy movements of recent decades in both the industrialized and developing worlds will provide one way of bringing this message home in practice as well as in terms of policy.

# INTRODUCTION

The history of adult literacy work in the United Kingdom can be treated as a "telling case"[1] of thinking about adult literacy in contemporary society, particularly in industrialized countries. It also provides points of comparison with literacy programs in Third World countries. The United Kingdom was effectively the first industrialized society to recognize the need for public support for adults with literacy difficulties—a problem that most countries have now come to acknowledge. This recognition, however, has created difficulties for the countries' self-images as modern and therefore fully literate. The ways in which different groups in the United Kingdom, from politicians and government agencies to middle class paternalists, to practitioners and radical activists, have approached the discovery of "illiteracy"[2] provide a kind of map for literacy movements generally. Many of the same groups and many of the same debates and contests are to be found elsewhere, though in each case refracted through local cultural conceptions of literacy, education, personal rights, and so forth.

The main purpose of this report, then, is not only to document a significant social movement in its own right—the development of adult literacy provision in the United Kingdom from the 1960s onwards—but also to help readers, by the contrasts and comparisons that it provides, to look more precisely and critically at literacy work in their own societies. The report commences with a brief historical view of the ways in which literacy has been approached. The account of the campaign itself is divided into three parts, corresponding to significant shifts in approaches to adult literacy in the United Kingdom.

First, the discovery of adult "illiteracy" during the 1960s, led to government grants, a national campaign, and the development of local practice and experience. The report documents some of the social movements, organizations, research, and informing concepts that characterized this formative period.

Second, there was a period of consolidation during the 1970s and early 1980s around the principle of learner-centered approaches, with minimal assessment procedures and central direction, and a growing body of expertise among practitioners who also began to undertake their own action research. During this phase, the government-funded agency, Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU), also consolidated and became expert in the production of materials, guidelines for good practice, and small research projects on aspects of literacy programs. Academic researchers began to take an interest in an otherwise marginal area, producing both surveys on levels of literacy and more ethnographic and practice-based qualitative research. A membership organization emerged for bridging academic/research and practitioner interests, Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RAPAL).

The third phase, which began in the late 1980s and which continues currently, has involved a considerable shift of policy and focus, under pressure from a government concerned with ensuring that education generally responds to national and economic needs, and provides measures for evaluation and certificates of achievement. ALBSU and Further Education Colleges[3] have developed procedures and research that respond to these demands in ways that

alter the basic approach to adult literacy work. An alternative strand remains focused on the ideas of the early movement—learner-centered, activist, socially conscious—organized around groups such as RAPAL and the Open College Network. These groups are resistant to the new central and homogenizing tendencies and are concerned with maintaining locally based methods of learning and research. They advocate, for instance, profiling rather than testing and action research of a qualitative kind rather than centrally driven quantitative surveys. The report describes these developments, with particular reference to policy and research, and puts them into perspective in relation to adult literacy work both historically and cross-culturally.

The methodology adopted is, perhaps, a little unusual for such historical surveys in that the emphasis is as much on first-hand sources as on documentary evidence. The voices of practitioners and activists in the field of adult literacy in the United Kingdom, including students and those who entered the movement as voluntary tutors, are given prominence in the report. This approach is congruent with the nature of the movement being described. Its principles are learner based and bottom-up, and participants involved in provision of literacy services believe strongly in listening to the voices of the adults with literacy difficulties who come to them for assistance. As Jones and Charnley (1978) note in their seminal survey of the first phase of adult literacy work in the United Kingdom, "Research methodology was largely defined through the character of the literacy project itself rather than as external and separate" (p. 2).

## Historical Background: Recurring Literacy Themes in England From the Norman Conquest

At the broadest ideological and political levels, adult literacy has been an issue in British society since at least the time of the Norman Conquest. Up until that time, it has been argued, literacy was mainly limited to the clergy. However, with the arrival of the Normans, pressure was exerted to develop literacy for secular purposes, a process that has continued to the present day. Clanchy (1979) documents what he terms the "shift to a literate mentality" (p. 2) between the 11th and the 13th centuries. Rights to land and property had previously been legitimized through oral means or through possession of communally recognized symbols—a sword or an illuminated Bible might have symbolized ownership of a given piece of land, to which a jury of twelve local residents could attest orally. The Normans, lacking this legitimation within indigenous British society, introduced instead an emphasis on written documentation in the form of pipe rolls—manuscripts validated by a notary—as necessary proof of ownership before the courts. At first, the local population resisted this shift, recognizing all too well that the claims for writing as more objective and scientific were spurious. Documents

could be forged, and indeed many were at this period, as Clanchy demonstrates. Moreover, the control of documentation through the conquerors' own bureaucratic institutions, such as a central Chancery, were loaded politically and ideologically against the indigenous population. However, the persistent institutional uses of these new forms of literacy meant that by the 13th century those with interests in land and property had come to learn the new ways, and a "literate mentality" became part of a dominant way of life.

There are themes here that have recurred in later eras, not only in Britain, but also more generally in the literacy programs and campaigns of the late twentieth century. The association of specific literacy practices with particular institutions and the political uses of those institutions by particular interest groups, the contests over ideological meanings of literacy, and the shifts from religious to secular, oral to written, local to central control, are all familiar features of contemporary literacy work (Barton, 1994; Street, 1995). It is, however, interesting to note that the institutions of literacy that have become dominant in this century—those of education and increasingly of the workplace—were less significant during these earlier periods.

Clanchy (1979) also provides an account of literacy practices in the 14th century that puts contemporary practices into perspective. In England at that time, he points out, learning literacy mainly meant learning to pray. The methods of acquisition were not associated with specific educational institutions, as in present-day society, nor with particular texts such as school reading schemes or adult primers; rather, they were based in the home, as mothers taught their children to read prayer books. The language of instruction was also significant, involving a mix of Latin and English. Latin had the authority of antiquity and of the Church, while English allowed for everyday vernacular usage such as in the kinds of legal activity outlined earlier. Again, familiar current themes can be identified already at this earlier stage. The location of literacy learning in the home, the role of women in socializing children into literacy practices, the conflict between the vernacular and the standard or dominant language are all common sources of debate and policy in literacy campaigns of the late twentieth century. Indeed, they are significant parts of the conflicts described below that characterize the initial stages of the literacy movement in England in the 1960s and 1970s.

What has changed significantly is the development of specific educational institutions as the locus for literacy work. Houston (1988) documents the gradual emergence in early modern Europe (1500-1800) of specific educational institutions for conveying literacy and the associated ideas about literacy and learning that have become commonplace. He argues that particular combinations of social structural factors—social stratification, job opportunities, economic changes—and of theories of the church, the state, and the people account for the common European movement to institutionalize education. At the same time, each country has developed its own particular configuration. In Britain, in the 19th century, for instance, educational theorists argued strongly for the cognitive benefits of literacy as favoring abstract thought, rationality, and the critical skills necessary for mass democracy. Politicians, however, were wary of educating the masses beyond their station and were concerned mainly with ensuring that they were trained in the disciplines of the workplace. Howard (1991) shows how the emergence of self-education and of Working Men's Associations in the mid-19th century were seen as threats by many. Auto-didacticism (especially learning to write) emerged "long before it was generally

accepted as an economically or morally desirable skill for all social classes" (p. 78). Where the working classes were allowed some access to literacy, as in Sunday schools, writing was frequently banned as encouraging the growth of subversive publishing and inappropriate aspirations. The emphasis was on teaching people to read: In that way, they could be exposed to only those tracts and documents that their teachers favored.

Again, themes for contemporary literacy debate were in place at this earlier period. There is considerable evidence today of contradictions between political claims for the importance of literacy in democracy and a desire to restrict the kind of literacy available to social and work disciplines. The debate over the cognitive consequences of literacy has been central to both academic research and policy and program planning in recent years. Likewise, the distinction between teaching reading (as a passive, hegemonic device) and writing (viewed as potentially subversive and counter-hegemonic) is familiar from many 19th- and 20th-century mission activities and from the often similar mass literacy programs of the post-war era. Many of the grand claims for literacy that underpin these activities and programs (Goody, 1986; Olson, 1994; Ong, 1982) have recently been challenged by the New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1990; Street, 1993). In these studies, emphasis is placed not so much on individual cognitive skills or on the "neutral" technical process assumed necessary for social progress, but on the cultural and ideological nature of literacy in specific social contexts (Barton, 1994; Graff, 1979; Street, 1994, 1995).

Attention to these historical themes and to the theoretical debates that underpin them can be helpful in making sense of the various stages of the adult literacy movement in the United Kingdom in recent years. Such a stance can put those events into broader historical and cross-cultural perspective, and provide some basis for more general and comparative analysis. A major theme for this purpose and a useful starting point for investigating the situation in the United Kingdom, is that of "illiteracy" as a kind of disease or lack on the part of the working classes. From the 19th century, there is evidence of liberal-minded members of the middle classes seeking to remedy "illiteracy" as they did extreme poverty—by means of paternalistic gift-giving to "deserving poor" (cf. Meinhof & Richardson, 1994).

The "Settlement" movement in Britain developed during the late 19th century as an expression of such ideas among those members of the middle class concerned with the widening gap between rich and poor, especially in urban areas. A Church of England vicar proposed that young undergraduates from the highest seats of learning in Oxford University form a "settlement" in the poor East End areas of London to try to bridge that gap and "to bring the benefits of their higher behaviour and forms of culture to the poor" (Mace, 1979, p. 11). By the mid-20th century, a number of such programs were well established, and it was from one of the Settlements—Cambridge House—that the first program for teaching literacy to adult volunteers was developed during the 1960s. This program lies at the heart of the much wider movement that emerged during the 1970s and represents what is described in this report as the first phase of the United Kingdom literacy movement. The early views of literacy described above provided, then, a significant

underpinning of ideas, which persisted in some cases through the campaigns described here, from the 1970s through the changes of the 1980s and even into the current phase.

# THE FIRST PHASE: THE RIGHT TO READ CAMPAIGN

## ORIGINS AND INITIAL DEVELOPMENTS

The United Kingdom was one of the first industrialized countries to recognize the existence of a "literacy problem" in a significant segment of the population, despite mass schooling and a self-image of affluence and progress (Withnall, 1994). During the 1970s, a number of activists and organizations came together around the concept of the Right to Read in order to draw public and government attention to the numbers of "illiterate" people in the country and the need for funds and organization to provide remedial tuition (Hargreaves, 1980; Mace, 1979; Stock, 1985). Before that, provision had been scattered and uneven. A few, relatively small voluntary associations, such as the Settlements, had included some literacy work in their more general welfare activity with the poor. Some Local Education Authorities (LEAs), such as Merseyside, and the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) made provisions for literacy work with adults. And Workers Education Associations, the inheritors of the 19th-century auto-didact tradition, offered courses, often in association with LEAs. Not much was known at this time about provision or need in this area. Previous reports had tended to concentrate on school-based criteria for literacy, and used school exit studies to make projections about adult problems.

In 1973, the Russell Committee published its Plan for Development in adult education (HMSO, 1973), and as a result, the educational and literacy difficulties of adults began to be taken more seriously. Thompson notes that the report was received with enthusiasm by those working in adult education, as the previous lack of attention to this area had "contributed to a sense of insecurity and insignificance" (Thompson, 1980, p. 86). The report focused on "disadvantaged" groups, in which it included those who were "illiterate" and advocated a partnership between education authorities and social services to overcome this deficit. It certainly helped channel interest into the literacy difficulties of what was conceptualized as a neglected, low-profile, lower class group. But institutional inertia and fear that funds might be diverted to this area and away from vested interests also caused the recommendations to be almost totally ignored in many sectors. The report did, however, begin to fill in the gap in research, commissioning studies regarding the actual social composition of those with literacy difficulties, the actual needs of different groups and the factors that prevented people from coming forward for help (cf. Clyne, 1972).

These reports and surveys, however, did not really enter public consciousness, and literacy in itself was not the well publicized national issue that it has come to be in recent years. Indeed, it was generally assumed that mass schooling had eradicated "illiteracy" and this was taken to be one of the marks of an "advanced" society. The challenge to this belief was, then, more

than simply the production of evidence about some technical need and the usual competing demands by interest groups for resources. The country's self-image was at stake and a campaign to draw attention to "illiteracy" was also a campaign about the state of Britain in the post-war years. This account of adult literacy work in the United Kingdom focuses, then, on that moment of lost innocence, when people began to realize that a large portion of the population was struggling to meet the everyday literacy demands of contemporary life.

During the early 1970s, a number of forces combined to generate a much higher public and government awareness of "illiteracy." In 1972, a number of Further Education Officers at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported that there was growing evidence of "illiteracy" around the country and proposed that the BBC use its broadcasting and educational facilities to make a contribution to overcoming this problem (Hargreaves, 1980). Data from field officers working in different parts of the United Kingdom suggested that there could have been as many as two million people who had poorer reading and writing skills than those of the average nine-year-old child. In addition, the number who were "functionally illiterate"—that is, unable to cope with the "normal reading and writing needed for a full life in our society" (Hargreaves, 1980, p. 7)—was probably considerably greater.

At the same time, a number of people working in LEA and in the British Association of Settlements (BAS) were coming to similar conclusions and attempting to organize interested groups in order to create pressure for resources and a higher public profile for literacy work. In November 1973, these interests came together in a well-publicized meeting at the BAS entitled Status Illiterate—Prospects Zero (a title that clearly signals the perspective being adopted at that time and which many activists in the field have since rejected). A campaign slogan—The Right to Read—was adopted, and a lobbying group called the National Committee for Adult Literacy was formed. An effective publicity campaign was mounted, in which the BBC and some Members of Parliament as well as BAS were prominent.

In May 1974, a Labour Member of Parliament (MP), Christopher Price, put forward with all-party support a Private Members' Bill in Parliament urging measures to ensure public funding for the work of adult literacy. The government approved a figure of £1 million (reputedly "engineered out of the higher education budget when most dons were sun-bathing in Corfu" [Mace, 1979, p. 19]). These funds were to be used to finance LEAs in order to provide voluntary programs for literacy work. The allocation of funds was to be handled by a new organization, the Adult Literacy Resource Agency (ALRA), which would not itself provide tuition but would respond to LEAs and to voluntary bodies, such as the Settlements, who would apply for support to mount programs. Most of the money would go to create and acquire resources and to invest in the training of unpaid volunteer tutors.

At the same time, the BBC accepted the proposal from its field officers and allocated £1 million to a series of television and radio broadcasts that would draw attention to the problem of "illiteracy" and also provide some basic educational programs. At first, the proposal was met with skepticism. On the one hand, it was not certain that those who hid their "illiteracy" through shame and embarrassment would come forward for help as a result of the issue's high profile on TV and radio. On the other hand, if they did

come forward, then those providing tuition would be swamped. In about 40% of LEAs, there was virtually no provision for basic literacy anyway, and those that did employ some voluntary workers could not cope with a massive upsurge in demand. Resources would be necessary to provide the support that would be required once public interest was alerted.

The BBC management insisted that the scheme include non-broadcast elements: the operation of a telephone referral service for would-be tutors and students, a financial contribution towards the training of tutors, research into materials production, and a research project into the effectiveness of the scheme. The field officers at the BBC worked with organizers of literacy schemes in LEAs and the BAS to design a series of programs. The programs were linked to an educational framework and were also intended to exert pressure for financial support from the government.

At this time, UNESCO was mounting similar campaigns in the Third World under the banner of "functional literacy" (Oxenham, 1980) and many of its assumptions about bringing light into dark and about the relation between rich and poor were taken up nationally as well as internationally. However, there was one important difference, noted by Hargreaves, who designed the BBC plan. In the United Kingdom, he suggested,

> . . . there was almost no prior experience in this field to draw upon since the international campaigns—and that in Southern Italy, the only other example in developed countries at that time—were addressed to societies in which illiteracy was common and bore little stigma. There had been no attempt to use broadcasting on a national scale to address the problems of stigma and embarrassment in an industrial society on a national scale, nor to use it also to mobilise such a society's untapped resources of human knowledge, kindness and generosity, by inviting people to apply to be tutors. (Hargreaves, 1980, p. 7)

The same social attitudes, paternalism and amateurism, can be identified here as in the Settlements' perspective of a hundred years before. It was on this basis that the first volunteer tutors were recruited and the first professional organizers were employed to train them and to coordinate demand and supply of tuition. The issues of voluntary service and of stigma remained central, as research into the effectiveness of the schemes highlighted.

Arthur Stock, director of the National Institute of Adult Education (NIAE) at that time, describes the early stages of the campaign succinctly in a paper published by UNESCO as part of its world-wide survey of literacy provision (Stock, 1985):

> Much of the early phase was hurried, ad hoc and piecemeal, although still remarkable in achieving an annual provision for some 70,000 adult literacy students with the regular annual deployment of the equivalent of 450 full-time staff, 4,500 part-time staff and 40,000 volunteer tutors and teaching aides. This was a pump-priming phase - in terms of operational finance, materials, expertise and training of tutors (particularly voluntary i.e. unpaid tutors). Over 50,000 such tutors were trained in this first phase. (p. 226)

At first it was assumed that this was a short-term, limited program, that most of the remedial "illiteracy" in the country could be dealt with in this way, and that ALRA would soon cease to exist as its task was accomplished. In practice, a succession of agencies has continued the work, professionals in the field have come to recognize that literacy difficulties are an endemic part of contemporary society as demands for literacy change, and a more professional approach to training, teaching, and research has emerged. But during the 1970s, the Settlements view of "illiteracy" predominated—that it was an unfortunate effect of the disadvantaged lives endured by many poor people, especially in the inner cities, a kind of disease that could be eradicated by the injection of proper cultural knowledge by their betters (Street, 1984, chapter 8).

## Initial Research: NIAE Report

As part of the non-broadcast element of the program, a research project was developed by the NIAE to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the campaign: *Adult Literacy: A Study of Its Impact* (Jones & Charnley, 1978). From the outset, research was an integral part of the literacy movement in the United Kingdom and the findings of this initial project were influential in affecting the design and strategy of future literacy work. The aims of the research included "to investigate the combination of elements in the range of motivational and instructional media (including those associated with broadcasting) that are found appropriate to different types of learner and teacher" (Charnley & Jones, 1979, p. 4). The research also monitored the "social benefits of increased literacy in family, job, leisure and other relationships and life styles." This is a broader definition of literacy work with a greater emphasis on social aspects than that envisaged by the government, but one that anticipated the focus in the 1990s on family literacy and workplace literacy. In keeping with this perspective and given the nature of the literacy campaign itself (tutors, for instance, had proved reluctant to fill in forms or to quantify information), a qualitative rather than a quantitative study was designed. This was based on unstructured interviews with tutors and students leading to summary reports that were discussed by the whole research team and condensed into the final document. A further series of visits was then made to a number of literacy programs in order to record the perceptions of administrators and organizers and to establish a set of hypotheses against which the field reports could be tested (Jones & Charnley, 1978). Research methodology was largely defined through the character of the literacy project itself rather than as external and separate, a point that is significant throughout the history of adult literacy work and research in the United Kingdom.

An important finding of the NIAE research was the variability among those who came forward: The stereotype of "illiterates" as unemployed and incompetent was challenged by the discovery that about half were in relatively skilled occupations. There was also much variation in their reading ability: "Only about one third were beginners with limited sound sight vocabulary" (Hargeaves, 1980, p. 91). What they all had in common, however, was a sensitivity to their literacy difficulties, however defined, and a history of "failure" in literacy or in school. While the campaign publicity was a major impetus to many coming forward, "the final decision to join often depended on personal support" (Hargreaves, 1980, p. 91).

The broadcast programs were evidently successful and students saw the television series *On the Move* as "a splendid recruiting means and as encouraging, but once they had joined a class, few students watched the programs regularly" (Hargreaves, 1980, p. 91). The programs and the materials associated with them were less significant than were learner-generated materials to the learning process itself. The issue of learner-generated versus centrally produced materials remains a source of contention among practitioners and providers.

The tutors attracted by the campaign were more uniform than the students in that over 80% were women, usually young, normally of good educational background; about a half were graduates or trained teachers. They were motivated by a mix of interests, from helping others to become literate to developing an interest of their own. While they might have begun with a focus on literacy skills, they gradually changed perceptions and began to recognize that students' needs were heterogeneous, often requiring counselling rather than teaching, a finding that was to dominate discussion and practice for the next decade.

The key argument of the research was that "*It is debatable whether mastery of literacy skills is to be regarded as a true measure of progress. The essential feature was the gain in self-confidence*'" (Hargreaves, 1980, p. 94). This challenged many of the dominant public images of literacy work and led to a number of distinctive strategies regarding curriculum and assessment in the adult literacy field: "A full program of adult basic education was required," not just narrow phonics-based or even functional literacy; and "standardised tests of skill levels based on children's reading ages" (Hargreaves, 1980, p. 94) came to be seen as inappropriate compared with modes of diagnosis that demonstrate progress in a more comprehensive sense (Holland, 1988). It became a creed that assessment must be congruent with the ways in which adults learn (cf. Rogers, 1992); that is, it must be interactive and supportive, in contrast with the ways in which many students experience schooling where testing was one-directional and threatening. Congruence was the view voiced by many activists in the early stage of the campaign.

## PARTICIPANTS' VOICES

In addition to the official research on this first phase, it is also instructive to hear the voices of participants, many of whom joined as volunteer tutors and are now professionally active in the field. A number of these volunteers report similar experiences at that stage (see the list of interviews and of those individuals consulted). One young man, for instance, reports that he was working as a secondary school teacher in London when he responded to the appeal for volunteer tutors and was given a part-time position in Haringey, working in the evenings after his day's school teaching (Harris, 1994). He was assigned to ten diverse students whose literacy problems ranged from spelling difficulties to having no literacy at all to difficulties with numeracy. The literacy organizer for the area left him to "get on with it" and he adapted school materials using, for instance, phonics approaches to spelling that were standard with school students. He was given some information on reading ages but otherwise little training. He recalls the work as having low public visibility, although as the national campaign got underway it did become part of a larger movement. Indeed it was in response to this that he, like many others at that time, left secondary teaching and worked full time for a number of years as a literacy

organizer, developing more sophisticated teaching methods and paying greater attention to tutor training than in the initial phase.

A student at the London School of Economics (LSE) saw a notice calling for volunteers: "I responded to it and . . . got trained as a volunteer in a community-based scheme in Islington" (Hamilton, 1994a). Like others, she came out of school teaching, but, in her case, was already at a tangent to the formal system. Her recollections of this phase are probably typical of many who became involved in the U.K. adult literacy movement:

> I had just finished working in a Steiner school for a year, and I had got interested in teaching reading and writing. I had also done a teacher training course which I didn't finish in fact, partly due to a kind of disaffection for formal schools, but I was still very interested in educational issues and an alternative kind of education and I think that's probably what attracted me to it. (Hamilton, 1994a)

There was not much contact with the other literacy teachers and the course of training was "fairly primitive." Her first pairing was with a young Irish man whom she met at the Islington Centre in North London and sometimes in his house. However, she felt that the one-to-one arrangement isolated both tutors and students and, like many of that generation of literacy tutors, she gradually moved into class-based teaching and got a part-time, paid job, teaching a group in Poplar Library.

It was only later that she saw this activity as part of a movement, with national publicity and networking among committed activists. At this stage, she saw it "as part of an individual thing," a way of supplementing her income as a student and applying some of her educational skills. To the extent that there was a larger agenda, it was to redress inequality and lack of access—"welfare and equal opportunities in education." This was a direction that she already saw being challenged by the government's interest in economic reform and employment. When a Manpower Services Commission (MSC) was set up by the government to help upskill the workforce, many literacy courses began to be funded on the basis of an employment agenda. She sees a direct continuity from these early concerns with the workplace through to current projects on workplace literacy that in her present role as a literacy researcher she is investigating for ALBSU.

Mace (1979), whose published account of her own experiences as a literacy tutor remains one of the best-known records of the period, replicates many of these experiences. She was involved in the Settlements activity before the national campaign. She reports that the press at the time, although it had a lot to say about the condition of adult "illiteracy" and was indeed a major factor in generating public interest and government funding, seldom gave space to first-hand accounts by adults themselves, or by "practitioners" like those cited here. Press accounts were restricted to imagined accounts of the "plight" of "illiterates." One newspaper report, quoted in her book, was indicative of many (her italics):

> It is almost impossible for accomplished readers to *imagine the plight* of non-readers who are still *groping around the alphabet in a fog*. But just try to *take a step into their world. Imagine what it's like* not being able to write a letter or read a

> newspaper . . . . These people are usually so ashamed of their disability [sic] that some manage to *hide the truth* from their own families and friends. They are often stuck in unfulfilling jobs, and because of the taboo that still *shrouds* illiteracy, they imagine themselves alone and fear ridicule in coming forward. (*Reading Evening Post,* August 8, 1976, cited in Mace, 1979, p. 22)

Mace suggests that this view of the "world of the illiterate" as concealment and semi-darkness reinforces an ancient notion of the magical power of literacy and is contemptuous of the lives "illiterate" people actually lead. This theme persists in many popular representations today among politicians, the media, and international experts (Street, 1991), and harks back to the earlier periods of English history outlined briefly above. Professional workers in the field and researchers who have investigated the actual living conditions of people with literacy difficulties have strongly rejected this view and instead describe complex and varied worlds of experience in which different levels and kinds of literacy play many different and culturally specific roles (Barton & Granic, 1991; Heath, 1983; Rogers, 1992; Street, 1984). Mace's account of her own experience is one of the earliest attempts to represent this reality in a more balanced and sensitive way in published work.

At this time, a student-written newspaper called *Write First Time* began to represent adults' own views. One student wrote a telling contribution to the paper, in response to fears expressed by a Member of Parliament (MP) about the politicization of literacy classes. The MP was afraid that the minds of "illiterates" would be fed with political propaganda by activists, but the student argued:

> We've got to read something: and I'm bloody sure I'm not reading Andy Pandy. That's a racing certainty. One television programme they were talking ab[illegible] literacy, and someone mentions a Ladybird book. I want to know what's going on in the world . . . . Students, to my mind, should be given newspapers more often. Because newspapers affect them. And if the newspaper's full of sex and violence, why not? It's all to do with us . . . . They seem to think that we're nice little people who are a bit shy and a bit quiet, because we never learnt to read and write . . . . I was working and living a long time before I could read and write and now I'm learning to read and write I want to know how to work and live even better. (Roger Weedon quoted in Mace, 1979, p. 24)

Faced with students like this, tutors were beginning to change their initial view of "illiterates" and of how to teach them. Another activist, one of the initial founders of *Write First Time*, wrote a seminal article in 1974 questioning the purposes of literacy workers (Shrapnell, 1974). Shrapnell, like Mace, was suspicious of the "social work approach" as she calls it, and advocated instead a "political approach":

> The political approach sees the student as a person wronged and deprived, not as a backward person. It sees the teacher's job as having no prescribed limit, and which includes all the disturbances and creation of consciousness of which any

> education is capable. It wishes to foster the independence and wholeness of the student. In order to do this, it demands material that is related to the basic concerns and growing points in the student's mind. (Shrapnell, 1974; quoted in Mace, 1979, p. 28)

It was this learner-centered view that became the dominant ideology for many practitioners during the following years.

Shrapnell's call for real materials relevant to the student's life is echoed by Stock (1985), though in less overtly political terms:

> From the very beginning of the British adult literacy campaign it was seen as important that the various target skills (oracy, literacy and later computational skills) should be presented in real life contexts which would demonstrate their utility and contribute to 'learning' in the terms of a given context, as well as in purely literacy terms. (Stock, 1985, pp. 227-8)

This approach has sometimes been defined as functional, but Stock is careful to distinguish it from what he terms "the rather narrow economic functionalism of the Unesco Literacy Programme" (p. 228) at that time. In the U.K. context, he argues, the "functional" approach was rather "associated with the contextual elements of the multimedia programmes employed" (p. 228). He illustrates this point with reference to the BBC television series *On the Move* which, as explained above, was an integral part of the early campaign. The series projected a serial story

> . . . about two furniture removers, in which the literacy stimulus and learning were worked into a wide variety of domestic, industrial and often humorous situations. The series also broadcast statements by new literates stressing the usefulness in terms of home, work and social life, as well as the delight and confidence achieved by the removal of what the new literates saw as a shameful stigma. (Stock, 1985, p. 228)

Alan Wells, who was later to become director of ALBSU (a position he has maintained for over a decade) also became involved at that time.[4] He recalls that "if you mentioned adult literacy to somebody at a party it was treated as quite exotic." He notes that, ironically, the campaign lost its momentum as soon as the government granted it funding:

> . . . the famous million [pounds]. Well it presented a real problem, because of course none of us ever thought that a million was anywhere good enough, but it's very difficult to start arguing when you've been given a big present, that actually you would have preferred something else rather more expensive. And it actually, I think removed the feet really from that kind of campaigning . . . . I mean what people were wanting to do was get hold of the million if they possibly could, which had been given to somebody else, to the National Institute of Adult Education who had brought in different people. So, that was a very short campaign I think

> compared to say Canada for instance, where it went on for a very much longer period than that. (Wells, 1994)

Like many activists at the time, he was concerned that the money would be a token gesture and keep the government from having to address the real underlying issues that led to such high levels of literacy difficulty. Much larger sums were required to support the educational work needed: "It does define the government's seriousness, because to make real money available you would have to make real changes somewhere in the education system." The new area of adult literacy work, thus, came into being as an essentially marginal one in government terms, a position that was to underpin the next decade.

## Persistent Themes and Issues

By the first year of the campaign, then, many of the themes and issues were in place that were to be worked over and elaborated during the second phase. Perspectives among providers and practitioners varied between (a) a legacy of 19th century "soup kitchen" approaches; (b) a more 20th century social welfare view that was still criticized as patronizing and top-down; (c) an overtly political viewpoint, often echoing, whether consciously or unconsciously, Freire's "conscientization" work in Third World literacy campaigns; (d) functional approaches that stressed "real" materials and relevant contexts, not just literacy itself; and (e) educational strategies that considered appropriate curricula and teaching methods in relation to more clearly defined aims and objectives.

These aims and objectives were, at first, often implicit and in conflict. While the government stressed work skills, many activists began to focus on confidence-building and overcoming stigma. As early organizers left tutors to "get on with it," the growing body of professional organizers began to develop tutor training and to build up appropriate materials geared toward adults, not children. Initially it was assumed that it would be necessary to prepare centrally produced texts, as with most school literacy, but practitioners soon moved to learner-generated material.

Likewise, the role of action research in this early phase set the tone for much that was to follow. While the media and government focused on statistics within a conceptual frame of "deficit," practitioners and some university researchers began to focus on participants' own perceptions and to design research around expressed need rather than centrally determined need.

Finally, the issue of funding underpinned the dominant view of literacy work in the United Kingdom. While the early campaigners were successful in winning a token grant from government, the real needs of the sector required considerably greater funding. The whole movement, for all its energy, commitment, and growing professionalism, remained (and probably still remains) relatively marginal in terms of mainstream education, in both budget and status.

# THE SECOND PHASE: CONSOLIDATION

## MAJOR THEMES

During the second phase, that of consolidation, the role of the Adult Literacy Resource Agency, which later changed its name and its functions a number of times, became crucial. At the same time, a body of expertise emerged on the ground among the practitioners who began to network and coordinate their activities in such a way that, in retrospect, they can appropriately be referred to as a social movement in their own right. The second phase is characterised by (a) the consolidation of the campaign not as a single intervention but as an ongoing activity, involving some substantial social commitment, at least by activists; (b) the continuation of government funding through an Adult Literacy Unit (ALU, 1978-80); (c) greater attention to the training of trainers; and (d) provision of funds for a number of action-research programs in different parts of the country.

The work of adult literacy was also widened in relation to the national Strategy for the Basic Education of Adults (Stock, 1985, p. 227), which now included not only limited literacy but also oracy, numeracy, and basic social and life skills. The target groups were also conceived of more broadly and in relation to a greater variety of contexts than simply the struggling "illiterates" of the poverty ghetto. Government, however, continued to define the issues as employment related— "literacy, numeracy and those related basic communication and coping skills without which people are impeded from applying or being considered for employment" (Stock, 1985, p. 227). The NIAE, like Hamilton and many of the practitioners, considered this too narrow a view, partly because of the difficulty of defining cut-off points. NIAE worked both to broaden aims and definitions at a national level and to act on an expanded view locally, in the actual materials, curriculum, and training that underpinned literacy work. Activists began to develop strategies for more political literacy work behind the surface rhetoric of the national bodies.

A major shift, already identified in the Jones and Charnley (1978) study, was away from volunteer and one-to-one teaching and towards classes held in centers and taught by tutors who were paid for their part-time work. This was seen as helping students to become more independent—many had become dependent on their tutors in the original one-to-one sessions and in any case the centers found it difficult to monitor exactly what went on in these sessions. The image of volunteers was also seen as inappropriate in a context where professional educational skills were being called for and where it became evident that literacy work with adults was a continuing process and not just a single intervention campaign. The trend towards professionalization, however, also created dilemmas for those committed to student-based learning and who were resistant to centrally produced materials or assessment. These tensions ran through the subsequent decade of adult literacy work in the United Kingdom—the consolidation period.

## THE INSTITUTIONAL BASIS FOR LITERACY WORK

Provision and resources for adult literacy work were continued after the initial period, whatever the competing interests and claims. The Adult Literacy Resource Agency (ALRA) became the Adult Literacy Unit and then the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU): Each change of title involved a broadening mandate to take account of more than simply fixing basic literacy. From 1978 onwards, the day-to-day funding of literacy work was included in the general adult basic education recurrent budget by LEAs. ALBSU's role was to help establish and demonstrate good practice. This it did through provision of materials and reports and by funding special projects, such as experiments with new kinds of provision or curriculum development. Although the famous grant of £1 million was intended to be for one year only as a form of pump-priming, it soon became apparent that the operation required more than this and both the BBC and NIAE made bids to government for continuation of the funding and of ALRA. As a result, the then Labour Government provided a further £2 million from 1976-78, while LEAs radically increased their own provision. In the words of one LEA officer, "My Authority, four years ago, spent £120 on literacy: in 1978/9 they provided £29,000 in the estimates for Adult Basic Education" (Hargreaves, 1980, p. 136). As Wells points out, this is still very small and marginal compared with the massive sums spent on mainstream education, but it does mean that the infrastructure was being developed and that literacy work was becoming recognized as more long term. In the three years from 1975-8, some 125,000 people had received tuition, and at the point of survey (February 1978), 70,000 were still receiving tuition.

Provision by LEAs, however, remained uneven from one area of the country to another and the best practice developed by some agencies was in stark contrast to the amateurish efforts or minimal provision evident in others. The special television programs came to an end in 1978 and the BBC began to "regard adult literacy and indeed the general field of adult basic education as a regular part of the BBC's work" (Hargreaves, 1980, p. 142). The BBC's own report stressed the need for continuing support: If two million people had been considered "illiterate" in 1974 and a further three million "sub-literate," then the 150,000 who had come forward after all the publicity and attention of a mass campaign represented only the tip of the iceberg. Now that the problem was recognized, the bulk of the real work remained to be done. Attention shifted from raising the issue to the different ways of addressing it.

## EMPLOYMENT VERSUS LEARNER-FOCUSED APPROACHES

One major area of conflict over how to address adult literacy concerned employment. The Manpower Services Commission (MSC) was asked to include adult literacy work in its provisions for enabling young adults in particular to be prepared for the workplace, and the MSC Youth Opportunities Scheme (YOPS) responded to this with a number of initiatives. LEAs and voluntary agencies could apply for funds from MSC under the YOPS to mount classes that had both a literacy component and an employment dimension. Tutors who had been funded by LEAs and voluntary agencies now found themselves putting together bids for such funding and writing up proposals that would meet the MSC criteria. These, however, often conflicted with their own focus on learner-centered, basic literacy work for those who had been failed by mainstream education.

McCaffery's (1988) account of the struggles by tutors at the Friends' Centre in Brighton to reconcile these competing demands is a classic case study of the period that was replicated in the Lee Centre in London, the Second Chance to Learn Scheme in Liverpool, and the Bolton Royd Centre in Bradford among other places. A number of the tutors at centers such as these felt that funds were being directed away from the most needy, for whom life skills and confidence were the key issues, and towards those who already had some skills and wanted preparation for the growing demands of the workplace. Hamilton, for instance, worried that the grass roots movement towards literacy was being squeezed out by a more formalized system like those in the United States and Canada. These, she believed, did not offer access to people who were at the most basic level:

> You needed a new literacy campaign later on that opposed itself to ABE and called itself the literacy movement again, to deal with people who were being excluded from the ABE programme. (Hamilton, 1994a)

Wells disagrees:

> All of the evidence is in fact that the people with the lowest attainment in some senses never actually came, and it would be hard to find any research of any kind, or surveys, that indicated they did. I think that's because people either are not motivated, they don't see, they just don't see it's going to make any difference to their lives; there's no incentive for them to do it. The people who can self-generate with very little have always been the easiest people to train. (Wells, 1994)

He rejects the argument that ALBSU has failed to cater to the most basic level of learner: "We've certainly never set a level up; in fact ours has been more concerned to set the level down" (Wells, 1994).

## Student Writing and Publishing

Another area of contention has been around materials and student writing. One area in which the United Kingdom has developed particular expertise in working with basic levels of literacy learning is the facilitation of student writing and publishing and their incorporation into the teaching and learning process. However, once again fears are expressed by many activists that this will be lost in the move to a more centralized curriculum and production of materials.

Encouraged by the Jones and Charnley report for NIAE (1978) and building on the experience of literacy workers in centers and programs around the country, a number of student writing and publishing initiatives emerged during this period. The influential national newspaper of student writing, *Write First Time* that was cited above as a source of student views on the literacy programs, also illustrated some important principles for subsequent work.

> One such principle is the necessity to transfer the responsibility for as much of the learning as possible from the

> tutor (or teacher) to the learners themselves—so that they determined what they should write. (Holland, 1993, p. 19)

In order to do this, it is necessary first to reduce the mystique that so often surrounds books and published material. As one tutor wrote:

> . . . the more control the writer has over the work that leads up to printing and over the sales of books - processes which all of us have had to learn by doing them - the less likely you are to endow printed matter with mystique and authority. To make a book also vitally changes your understanding of yourself - from taker to maker. (Shrapnell, 1979; quoted in Stock, 1985, p. 3)

This process is taken a stage further with the development of community publishing. Gatehouse Press, for instance, has been engaged in this work since 1978 and the title of their latest publication *Literacy and Literature: Community Writing and Publishing in Adult Education* (1993), indicates the persistence of this approach from that earlier period. Work with ethnic communities, especially in recording oral history, is now being published. *Moving Stories* contains material written by learners who are also itinerants (Traveller Women). Each year the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) in the United Kingdom presents an award to an outstanding learners' group and this often goes to an adult education group that writes its own material. *Not Just a Number* and *If It Wasn't for This Second Chance*, edited by the National Federation of Education Schemes, are two examples of work produced by learner groups. Activists in this field have organized a network of community publishers called The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (cf. Morley & Walpole, 1982).

Holland points out, however, that "many local workers were concerned at the cost and style of these publications, which are aimed at a national market, and feel that they do not have the energy, resources or confidence to go in for publishing glossy-looking productions." So they instead have focused on "more home-made short print-run materials" (Holland, 1993, p. 19). In a recent report, *Versions and Variety, a Report on Student Writing and Publishing in Adult Literacy,* O'Rourke and Mace (1992) argue that these more limited editions have as much educational validity as the bigger, more professional-looking productions (cf. also Mace, 1995). In the area of student writing, as in other domains, there are tensions about the extent and effects of centralization not only between practitioners and central agencies such as ALBSU or the government, but also among practitioners themselves.

## ASSESSMENT

Similar tension between smaller and larger scale, local and national level, and more and less centralized direction can be found in the area of assessment. Charnley and Jones (1979) emphasize the assessment of social factors, such as success in getting jobs or of personal development, such as growth in self-confidence. "Progress defined in these ways reveals an educational experience that is wider and more significant than the mere remedying of skill deficiencies" (Holland, 1993, p. 20).[5] During the 1970s and early 1980s in the United Kingdom, these principles dominated the discussion of assessment in adult literacy. Like the curriculum, assessment was to evolve with the individual student or group and was to relate directly to the teaching. Evidence from case

studies undertaken as part of an ALBSU-funded research and development project (Holland, 1988) suggested that assessment of progress in adult literacy in England and Wales continued to be dominated by informal procedures more than a decade after the NIAE report: "Progress has been described by students and tutors mostly in terms of personal and social development" (Holland, 1993, p. 20).

## RESEARCH: ALBSU

There are a number of directions from which research in adult literacy has emerged in the United Kingdom—agencies such as ALBSU and NIAE, universities, and practitioners themselves. Wells argues forcefully that there is no place for a single, centrally directed research unit and that certainly ALBSU had no wish to take on that role: "We don't see ourselves as the font of all wisdom in this, and controlling all of it in a kind of centralised model" (Wells, 1994). ALBSU's own directions are determined by its corporate plan:

> I think that two areas that we wanted to particularly concentrate research on, one was on this whole area of scale of need because for a long while what we had effectively was self report, nothing else, and on very limited numbers: we still have to some extent. So we wanted to look at that. And the second, which I think was a particular shift, was to look at the effectiveness of what was going on. I was always very keen not to start looking at effectiveness, this is in hindsight probably not right, but when everything was really embryonic, looking like it was going to be wiped out tomorrow, - which it was in 1981 for instance when big cuts took place - the worst thing was to start talking to people about how effective the provision was, they were actually wondering whether it was going to exist tomorrow. And that's when we started looking at longer term research, like the research we've done into drop out and progression. (Wells, 1994)

Baynham, as a practitioner and a researcher in the field, lists what he saw as some of the important research projects undertaken by ALBSU during this period.

> The development of ABE in this period was driven by issues of policy development, development of provision and curriculum development. ALBSU as the funding agency played a key role in these developments: the ALBSU/ISLE ESL/Literacy project (1981-83), the ALBSU computer literacy project (1987- ) the Independent Learning in ESL and Adult Basic Education (ABE) project (1984-6). (Baynham, 1990)

## ACADEMIC RESEARCH

University researchers appear to have taken very little interest in adult education or literacy as research areas in the United Kingdom. Most educational research, including that on literacy, tends to focus on schooling, on acquisition of reading skills, and on teaching methodologies rather than

on either the everyday social practices of literacy in society or on the adult literacy movement and its participants. Jones and Charnley's (1978) commissioned research on the first phase of the government-funded program described above is one of the few exceptions. McCaffery (1994) argues that this gap is not just accidental but endemic to the way the field is conceptualized by those involved. The marginalization of literacy work serves as both cause and effect of this gap. She highlights in particular the lack of theoretical underpinning and the often anti-intellectual stance among practitioners, although as experience developed, many did enter university courses. In keeping with the general marginalization of the field in academic terms, many of these courses themselves seldom evince much interest in adult literacy, and potential students have to hunt around for sympathetic tutors and relevant material. There is a lack of pedagogic theory in adult education in general and of theory on adult literacy in particular—as opposed to child learning, which is assumed to be the focus for work on literacy acquisition. McCaffery also describes the irony of "limited UK effectiveness on the world stage where in practice it was 'leading' amongst industrialised countries but in theoretical understanding and interpretation was way behind" (McCaffery, 1994).

Despite the record of achievement recorded here, the full potential of adult literacy work in the United Kingdom has not been realized, due perhaps to an endemic British resistance to theory and comparison. Practitioners help reinforce their own marginalization by stressing experience and practice at the expense of theory, while university researchers and academic publishers generally focus on traditional and more prestigious work in schools and on child literacy, and fail to take into account the significant potential of this area for both research and theory.

Ken Levine's research on an adult literacy program in Nottingham, supported by the Social Science Research Council, is therefore all the more important, particularly since it has also been published as a book and become more generally available (Levine, 1986). Levine locates the particular literacy scheme that he studied in the broader context of debates about the definition and measurement of literacy, placing it both in historical perspective and in relation to the British Adult Literacy Campaign. He provides a detailed account of the Nottingham scheme and attempts to challenge the dominant myths and rhetoric around literacy activity in Britain.

His data illustrate, for instance, the difference between the expectations of literacy held by employers, that feed into tests and gatekeeping exercises for potential employees, and the actual requirements for literacy in their workplaces. The kinds of language and literacy skills needed to pass the tests are seldom related to those needed in factories, where oral communication frequently fulfils many of the functions of daily procedure, safety, and so forth. Specific literacy practices can be learned on the job and are not necessarily predicted by the kind of literacy inscribed in the tests, as insight developed further in recent tests on workplace literary shows (O'Connor, 1994).

He also provides a helpful analysis of the contrasts between tutor and learner expectations and orientations to literacy (Levine, 1986, p. 118). Students arriving with an "instrumental" orientation to literacy may find themselves at odds with tutors who adopt a "pastoral" orientation. Where tutor

and student orientations are congruent, tutoring is likely to be more effective than where they are incompatible.

The Lancaster Literacy Research Group, based at Lancaster University, has also been prominent in developing academic research into aspects of literacy and adult basic education in the United Kingdom. Mary Hamilton undertook an analysis of the National Child Development Study data on literacy and numeracy for the MSC and ALBSU and has followed this up with further analysis of the cohort students (Hamilton, 1987, 1988). She has also conducted an investigation of employer attitudes and practices with respect to developing literacy and adult basic education in the workplace for the Leverhulme Trust (Hamilton, 1992). Qualitative, case study research of this kind, while sparse in university terms, has become significant among practitioners themselves during this phase, as the next section illustrates.

## PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

Baynham's overview (1990) of the development of a "research base to underpin Adult Basic Education (ABE) practice" (p. 27) indicates the ways in which practitioners themselves have begun to work in this area. He describes a "series of key conferences in the mid 1980s at which ABE practitioners and researchers in the UK met to identify the gaps in their knowledge" (Baynham, 1990, p. 28). These conferences (reported in Baynham & Mace, 1986; Hamilton & Barton, 1985; Hamilton, Barton, & Ivanic, 1994; Lobley, 1988; McCaffery & Street, 1988) were, according to Baynham, field-formative in that they represented the beginning of documentation and the possibility of networking and sharing findings and outcomes. One leading activist offers an explanation for the lack of knowledge up to that stage:

> The position . . . reflects adult literacy as a form of education developing locally in response to needs and deliberately branded an alternative philosophy to initial education, which had branded adult literacy students as failures. But this classic exposition of the literacy tutor's feeling of marginalisation was beginning to be balanced by a desire to firm up what they did know. This alternative approach necessitates a firm underpinning or there are dangers, particularly as the years pass, of either the alternative approach being vague or drifting back to the remedial approach for lack of a fully worked out programme. (Jupp, cited in Baynham, 1990, p. 28)

Tutor research would help provide such a firm underpinning and develop what Lytle and Cochrane-Smith in the United States have referred to as a "new kind of knowledge" (1993). Towards this end, Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RAPAL) began to run short courses and seminars on research methods, attended by both academic researchers and adult literacy tutors (Baynham & Mace, 1986; Lobley, 1988). The Association also published a regular newsletter that often reported research findings (cf. Hamilton, 1994b).

The link between academic researchers and practitioners through RAPAL has meant that theoretical debates about language and literacy began to inform practice, while theoreticians were brought face-to-face with literacy work on the ground. Social theories of literacy (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984) and

linguistic models (Barton, 1994; Stubbs, 1987b), along with practitioner accounts of their own experiences (McCaffery, 1988), became familiar in the publications of this period, as well as in the pages of RAPAL and in books of conference papers (e.g., Hamilton, Barton, & Ivanic, 1994).

One key area where these interests met was around the language and literacy issues raised by second language learners. In London and Manchester, Afro-Caribbean projects were set up that were concerned with describing language variations and needs, developing curriculum materials, and addressing policy issues such as the relationship between Creole and standard written English. The Manchester project teachers' handbook lays out the aims in the following way:

> Our learning materials were not designed to change the way people speak. They were designed to clarify the complex language situation of Caribbean-heritage people, for students and teachers. Then students can undertake the task of learning a second language code—written standard English—with a clearer view of what they are attempting. In *Celebrate* we present models of written standard English. In *Versions* we encourage students to look at the points of contrast between Creole and standard English. Our emphasis is on the students writing and using their knowledge of both systems to check the accuracy of their written standard English. (cited in Baynham, 1990, p. 9)

A major research project on French-based Creole in Tower Hamlets, East London, emerged out of an adult literacy class in a way that might be indicative of future developments in this area. The tutor, Hubisi Nwenmely, realized that many speakers of St. Lucian Creole were nervous about admitting to it because of its low status and lack of a written code (Nwenmely, 1990). The class became a research group that began to develop an orthography and to standardize some usages as a basis for helping validate St. Lucian Creole in London. At the same time, such knowledge contributes to the recognition of the nature of standard written English, as in the Manchester project. As Hornberger (1994) notes, in a wide-ranging comparative review of biliteracy, facility in different writing systems enhances rather than undermines knowledge of the literacy of power. The St. Lucian Creole research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), thus demonstrating the emerging bridge between practitioner research and academic research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The second phase of adult literacy work in the United Kingdom represents a consolidation of the activities of the discovery phase. This involves a broadening of activity, a consolidation of national funding for literacy programs, and a link between practitioners and researchers. At the same time, the government agency ALBSU was consolidating its own institutional base and aims, beginning to look towards research and defining best practice as a way of levelling out the unevenness and sometimes amateurishness of the early phase. It is on this base that the final and current phase is being built.

# THE THIRD PHASE: BROADENING AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

## CHANGES: ACCREDITATION, INCORPORATION, AND CERTIFICATION

A marked change can be identified in adult literacy work in the United Kingdom towards the end of the 1980s. As Hamilton writes, "success in ABE is no longer defined in terms of the quality of the process of learning, but in terms of skill and outcome" (Hamilton, 1994b, p. 2). From ALBSU's perspective, the change is one of increased professionalization and rigor. Institutions that provide literacy teaching are vetted for their ability to provide a number of basic features of adult support, based on best practice that emerged during the consolidation phase. As well as institutional accreditation, students themselves are being provided with certificates of achievement that are more externally defined and validated than in the profiling of the earlier phase. Furthermore, the whole process of literacy teaching has been incorporated into the provision of the Further Education (FE) sector and subject to its institutional requirements and funding demands, including employment-related outcomes.

These developments have been underpinned by national legislation. The Education Reform Act of 1988 introduced National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) with increasing use of performance indicators as an alternative to the academic stream represented by traditional A-level qualifications. A further Act in 1992 "made it quite clear that the government only wishes to fund courses and training that lead to recognised qualification, namely NVQ and NVQ related accreditation. The government's emphasis for the post 16 curriculum is on work based, vocational training" (Holland, 1994, p. 4).

Government pressure for improved provision and quality in education and training at all levels has affected the adult literacy sector in a number of ways. One initiative, for instance, has been ALBSU's development of Wordpower and Numberpower certificates (ALBSU, 1991). These certificates are competency based, in line with the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) system. Rhetorically, at least, this shift allows for individual expression of competence and is not in conflict with the learner-centered principles of the early phase. Thus, according to Holland (1994, p. 4) "students are enabled to demonstrate the specific competencies in contexts that are personal to them, allowing for a more personally and socially constructed concept of Literacy as opposed to a traditional view of literacy as a fixed and rigid set of mechanistic skills." The competencies provide a structure, if not a syllabus, and students are encouraged to keep portfolios and to demonstrate their competency within agreed parameters.

Hamilton's survey (1994b), however, suggests that assessment of these competencies for purposes of certification may lead to tutors treating Wordpower and Numberpower as traditional syllabi. This involves focusing their students on atomized skills in order to pass, thereby maintaining the institution's funding base in line with outcome-related funding.

A further assessment initiative in the past decade has been the Open College Network (OCN), which accredits courses rather than individuals in the first instance. Students who satisfactorily complete an accredited course can be certificated. OCN accredits courses at different levels, and these link into the NVQ system. OCN provides a rigorous means for teachers to examine critically what they are doing and why. It requires them to record, monitor, and assess student progress and to evaluate their teaching and the program itself.

The shift towards FE-based provision has recently been assessed in a survey conducted by Mary Hamilton of Lancaster University (Hamilton, 1994b). A questionnaire was sent to a sample of Open Learning Centres that provide literacy tuition and to a matching sample of established literacy providers (LEAs, etc.) plus to members of RAPAL. Respondents were asked to indicate their experience with and attitudes toward the changes in the organization of adult literacy provision outlined above. Most reported changes on a number of dimensions: job titles and responsibilities (59%), sources of funding (over 66%), location of provision (41%), and organization and management (66%). A significant finding in terms of the history of provision described here is that 40% reported that the types of students that they were working with are changing: Tutors are seeing more mainstream, younger, and full-time students and fewer basic-level return-to-learn students with non-vocational and long-term needs. This finding appears to reinforce the argument noted above that the kind of student identified with the original literacy campaign is less supported by the new system.

When asked what effect outcome-related funding was having on their provision of literacy services, negative effects far outweighed positive: "On the positive side people said that monitoring and reviewing their practices had made them more focused, enabled them to take a fresh look at what they are doing, and brought greater rigour and vigour to their work" (Hamilton, 1994b, p. 4). Bringing adult basic education out of the margins and into the mainstream had the effect that students then had a further set of educational options at the end of their basic classes while management took the sector more seriously. On the negative side:

> . . . respondents are concerned that the pressure toward standardisation is leaving less room for negotiated, personalised, student-centred work and making it harder to offer flexible courses. The idea of 'drop in' that had been pioneered by Open Learning Centres did not fit with the new system of registration and timetabled provision. And the new system of funding, accreditation and competition between centres militates against lower-level students and those with learning difficulties. (Hamilton, 1994b, p. 4)

From these findings, Hamilton's prediction in her interview (Hamilton, 1994a) of a new literacy movement to recreate the conditions and to cater to the clientele of the first movement seems likely.

All agree that this period is a watershed for ABE. The third phase, which is still being developed and digested as this report is written, represents a significant change from the past, and careful research is going to be necessary to monitor its effects. There are clearly lessons here for those working in adult literacy in other countries, particularly those in the industrialized world that

similarly "discovered" literacy difficulties in the adult population during the 1970s and 80s.

## BROADENING PROVISION?

Holland, although herself critical of some of the assessment changes in this period, offers a more positive view of the current position, which she sees as reflecting "the broadening scope of literacy work in the UK" (Holland, 1993, p. 20). For instance, there has been an expansion of the base of providers. It has become recognised that ALBSU and the education-based institutional providers of literacy and basic skills support tend to reach only a small proportion of the population who need to improve their skills. It is therefore helpful to have many different points of access and entry to educational programs.

Many people do not identify an evening class at a local college as a means of solving their difficulties. Basic skills problems are often only identified and articulated as part of another issue. Thus providers in Birmingham identified basic skills needs among those carers (people who care for others such as elderly relatives or disabled children) who suddenly found themselves having to cope with new tasks in their own lives. Literacy and basic skills workers are consequently trying to find ways of meeting the basic skills needs of people in as focused a way as possible and as close to the point of need as possible. "Thus in some areas, health visitors now provide much of the basic skills support to those of their clients who feel this need, which only appears alongside the medical problems when they are required to follow complicated regimes of medication" (Holland, 1993, p. 20).

One effect of these changes is that professionals—health visitors, carers, and so forth—not normally involved in literacy work are being helped with staff development and training programs to enable them to provide literacy support to their clients. The Friends' Centre in Brighton, for instance, won a grant from ALBSU to conduct a pilot outreach program to provide training to non-literacy specialists. These included workers in a hostel for the unemployed, those at a day care center for people with handicaps, and other social service workers, who were given some training in adult literacy theory and practice so that they could provide some literacy tuition for their clients. The aim of such pump-priming funding is both to insert such provision into the mainstream and to provide models for other districts. In Durham, the need for literacy skills among local council workers became apparent when the council housing department established tenant management boards that invited participation by local representatives. Local communities articulating their case for housing provision have likewise come to recognize a need to improve literacy skills in a more bottom-up way that replicates some of the initiatives of the early phase (cf. Thompson, 1980).

Holland concludes with the following:

> What is now increasingly being recognised is that the social context for literacy and post-literacy is all important and that the home, the workplace, and the state services (health, housing, welfare etc.) are now the playing fields for basic skills work with adults. These are where many people first

> feel the lack of basic skills and this is where they need to be supported. This would seem to take us full circle back to the early 1970's when the 'On the Move' programmes on the BBC suggested that the prime aim of helping people to improve their literacy skills was to enable them to become increasingly independent and to gain the confidence and skills they required in order to operate as they need in their own lives. (Holland, 1994, p. 21)

This perspective replicates that being developed in international literacy work, where Roger's concept of "literacy second" (i.e., literacy needs identified in relation to a particular task or sector) is replacing the emphasis on basic literacy classes on their own (Rogers, 1994). As in many developing countries, where newspapers include an insert specifically geared to adults with "low literacy," in the United Kingdom the press are becoming involved. In Middlesborough, newspaper staff are being encouraged to undertake some basic skills teaching. General articles on spelling and writing are appearing in the local newspaper and a learning pack on newspapers is being prepared. "These and other initiatives serve to draw more people in as learners and as facilitators, while simultaneously expanding the materials and approaches used" (Holland, 1994, p. 20). Perhaps Hamilton's alternative approaches persist alongside the new mainstream work of FE Colleges, and the traditional student is not so under-served as she feared.

Leslie Morphy, Head of Research and Development at ALBSU (and herself a former volunteer tutor in the first phase, who then worked with the BBC providing support services for literacy work), likewise sees the present phase as a broadening of the base of provision. Whereas basic skills training was previously provided mainly by LEAs, the present policy to extend provision into Colleges of Further Education and into the workplace itself provides a variety of routes to basic skills training for students. Far from disadvantaging those with the most basic needs, as Hamilton and other critics have argued, Morphy sees this strategy as enhancing their prospects of finding appropriate support. During the 1980s, the number of providers scarcely increased and the range remained static, so that those potential students for whom this provision was unsuitable were not provided for. Workplace training in particular will, she believes, make basic skills available more directly to such people.

The Open Learning Project at Lancaster and Goldsmith's Universities (funded by Universities Funding Council) is currently conducting research that should cast light on the issue of multiple routes and their take up (cf. Bergin & Hamilton, in press). The researchers took six case study sites in London and the North West and investigated students' experience of learning in Open Learning Centres (a special initiative funded by ALBSU to allow students to drop in to Centres that provide learning support [cf. O'Mahony, 1992.]) The research also looked at other established provision for literacy learning, such as LEA classes in the same area. The concept of "Travel to Learn Areas" enabled the researchers to identify all of the options available in a locality for ABE support and then to track how students move between them.

There are differences between the kinds of students found in different types of provision. Students in Open Learning Centres, for instance, tend to be more confident, experienced learners with previous experience of adult education, while those in established provision (e.g., community centers and LEA-funded

groups) are the lower level readers. They tend to be less confident, first-time returners to education of the kind initially targeted by *On the Move*. The latter groups also had less well-defined goals and included students with learning difficulties.

A new sorting process is happening in adult literacy provision. This is being decided to some extent by the institutions themselves. Students, especially those in the Further Education sector, are directed to sources of provision by tutors and office staff rather than defining the need themselves. The traditional providers of literacy to those who define their own needs are meanwhile becoming restricted. The range of services is, then, perhaps not as strong or varied as Morphy claims. Hamilton (1994a) argues, for instance, that LEA-supported provision is chronically short of funding and consequently rather limited in contrast with the now statutory funding for Further Education College courses. As the money moves to the Colleges and away from LEAs, the Colleges direct it to particular categories of students, notably those already registered in College courses. The money is then used more for learning support than for free-standing adult basic education. Those courses, Hamilton (1994a) points out, are increasingly being funded in terms of outcomes—evidence of students who have passed specific levels of curriculum and assessment.

This has implications for the way in which curriculum and assessment are provided. ALBSU's (1991) *Wordpower* document, for instance, was intended as a tutor guide, but in this new context, it tends to be used as a set curriculum and as a basis for determining student progress. The assessments based on these materials in turn determine the resources that are made available to the FE College. Again the model of flexibility and variation in student access and choice is countered by the practice of narrowing curriculum and assessment determined by outcome-related funding.

Indeed, both Morphy and Wells are very suspicious of this method of funding: "I think the great danger, particularly with things like output-related funding is that what people do is take people who would get a certificate anyway, get them a certificate without doing too much, and then they appear as a good statistic" (Wells, 1994).

The role of ALBSU in this new situation is, according to its current leaders, not to intervene too closely at the level of College and LEA provision, or even, as in the 1980s, to provide tutor training. Rather, it is to act as a development agency, helping to establish what constitutes good practice and to endorse those who provide it through benchmarks and standards. The agency has changed its name again, in line with these developments, from ALBSU to The Basic Skills Unit, dropping altogether the reference to literacy in Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit. For ALBSU, a shift to being a development agency for basic skills signals progress beyond the problems of traditional usages of the terms "literacy" and "illiteracy" in the adult sector, and even allows it to deal with basic skills issues in schools, according to some interpretations.

However, echoes of the early conception of "functional literacy" used by UNESCO and international agencies (cf. Oxenham, 1980; Verhoeven, 1994) remain in the unit's definition in its publicity of basic skills as: "the ability to read, write and speak in English and to use mathematics at a level necessary

to function at work and in society in general." Indeed, the word *basic* itself still raises problems at both political and educational levels.

## RESEARCH

A further shift in ALBSU's role since 1990 has been towards explicit involvement in research. During earlier phases, the agency was implicitly involved in much action research, particularly through its Local Development Programs, but it had no formal remit from government for more explicit or wide-ranging involvement. Recently, however, the Department for Education (DfE) has officially agreed that ALBSU can tender for bids to undertake research projects, which it funds directly, although the DfE has to approve each project separately. Newspapers have recently carried advertisements for a number of such projects, alerting the research community to ALBSU's role and to its view of literacy issues.

Morphy describes ALBSU's interest as of mainly two kinds: research on the scale of basic skills needs and research on the effectiveness of provision. The first major involvement in research on scale was of a quantitative kind. The various cohort studies of the development of groups of children born in one week were investigated for evidence of literacy and numeracy problems (Ekinsmith & Bynner, 1994; Hamilton, 1987, 1988). This has produced information on the members of the basic skills difficulties subgroup and its recent history, including the educational performance of their children. Publications of these findings have frequently provided the media with their evidence for "illiteracy" in Britain, although ALBSU itself has used the data to argue with the government about the importance of provision for basic skills training to adults as part of the re-skilling of British industry. Indeed, a major study of basic skills needed at work by the Institute of Manpower Studies for ALBSU (1993) revealed an increasing need for basic skills and a rapid decline in jobs not needing communication skills.

In the new phase, qualitative studies are also beginning to be undertaken, particularly regarding the effectiveness of training provision. The Institute of Education in London was funded by ALBSU to undertake a survey of progression and drop-out among students on a range of Further Education courses. The discovery that institutions often did not know what was happening to students as they moved from one course to another has been a call for more careful monitoring of progression and for more support for students especially at the early stages of programs of learning.

A number of family literacy programs have developed in the United Kingdom in recent years, some following models provided in the United States. ALBSU is currently funding research projects that investigate the effectiveness of different models as well as providing small grants for organizations involved in family literacy work to evaluate their programs. In a liaison with the BBC reminiscent of the early *On the Move* programs, a series of advertisements for ALBSU's family literacy pack were broadcast in 1994/5. Although 2000 packs had been provided, demand exceeded 10,000, including not only parents interested in helping with their children's literacy, but also schools starved of resources and eager to obtain any free materials.

By default, ALBSU has also found itself taking some part in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), although this was not part of the original

remit and it has not yet developed great expertise in this field. A survey of the level of language and educational support needed in this area is currently being funded.

The Lancaster research group has continued to undertake research projects, both in connection with ALBSU and also funded by more traditional academic organizations such as the Leverhulme Trust. A recent investigation of Open Learning in ABE (summarized above) was funded by the Universities Funding Council as a collaborative project with Goldsmith's College in London (Bergin & Hamilton, 1994).

## WORKPLACE LITERACY

Action programs for literacy at the workplace have emerged more slowly in the United Kingdom than in some other industrial societies. One of the most persistent has been the Workbase program (partly funded by ALBSU until 1994), which aims to create strong links between industry and literacy agencies operating in the workplace. Begun by some trade union activists in the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE), many of whose members work in a low pay sector, literacy and education were seen as part of workers' rights (a somewhat unusual view in the British context as Wells suggests below).

From a government and employer perspective, Training and Enterprise Councils (TECS) charged with supporting local employment and skills training have also come to recognize a literacy dimension to their work, although educationalists argue that their interpretation is often very narrow and skills focused. While in Australia workplace literacy has become part of a national debate about the smart society and world competitiveness, which is being addressed through alliances between trade unions, government, and educators (Freebody & Welsh, 1993; O'Connor, 1994), in the United Kingdom there has not been much public or national attention to standards of basic skills or to such alliances. Wells suggests a number of reasons for this difference. One is "the reluctance of unions in this country to get involved in issues outside of their own field; if you talk to unions about trade union education, they're talking about being educated to be a trade unionist, a trade union official for instance; often not talking about the wider education of people" (Wells, 1994). Although the Trades Union Council has often supported educational initiatives, at the local level there is often resistance.

Another explanation offered by Wells for the relative marginalization of such efforts is the lack of state support for workplace literacy and training programs of the kind now evident in Australia and America: "One of the differences in Australia of course is subvention of one kind or another; there is still a taxation which, as there used to be here, produces money for training" (Wells, 1994).[6] Small employers, he suggests, cannot provide on-site training without such government support; they have neither the resources nor the expertise.

Wells is also critical of what happens when employers have called upon the help of adult literacy organizers in their regions to contribute to their training needs. Frequently, he suggests, literacy tutors have seen such extra students as a means to boost their class sizes without paying substantive attention to the specific literacy and skills needs of such groups. Drop-out

rates, as a result, tend to be high. Training for tutors to cope with these demands in a more professional way has therefore become a central issue in the current phase of literacy work. It is for these reasons that the accreditation and assessment procedures have been tightened up in ways that worry some activists but which respond to the needs identified at the broader level by government and central organizations concerned with standards and skills for the new millennium.

## Trends and Directions

Mary Hamilton, in a recent article entitled "The Development of Adult Literacy Policy in the United Kingdom: A Cautionary Tale" (1992), expresses the concern felt by many activists at the changes outlined above. A key argument is that, despite the appearance of design and planning in these changes, they are not in fact the result of deliberate and specific policy for literacy education. Rather "ABE has been swept along by national reforms of educational and funding structures that have not been designed with the needs of ABE students in mind" (Hamilton, 1992, p. 45). Government concern for free-market institutions and funding, including competition, market testing, privatization, and accountability have been developed with other, more central institutions in mind, and the adult literacy movement has simply inherited them irrespective of their relative advantage to this sector. Although the changes have been turned to advantage where possible, "in important respects the current reforms take us further away from a coherent policy for literacy and threaten some of the distinctive and innovative forms of ABE that were pioneered in the UK" (Hamilton, 1992, p. 46).

The two issues raised here by Hamilton remain central to the analysis and development of this sector: (a) the lack of coherence in policy for a sector that has effectively remained marginal during the period reviewed here and (b) the development of innovative and learner-sensitive methods in adult literacy provision, perhaps not unconnected with that marginalization. They apply not only to institutional arrangements and teaching methodologies, but also to the issue of research, which has remained relatively fragmented and ad hoc like the subject under enquiry.

The very definition of the field itself, in particular the organizing concept of "literacy" (with its implicit signaling of "illiteracy") has been equally confused and contested. There has been confusion and contestation both conceptually and in the relationships among those who have become involved—academic researchers, practitioners, the government-funded agency ALBSU, and the popular press. For an area that began full of hope and in many cases, optimism that the problem of "illiteracy" would quickly be dealt with and progress resumed, this is a pessimistic conclusion. It is, perhaps, one that is more in keeping with the post-modern condition of fragmentation and uncertainty that currently prevails than the simpler faith of the era in which the Settlements emerged.

## Comparative Perspectives

The philosophical and ideological debate indicated here has its roots in earlier periods of British history, and it soon became apparent in the literacy movement being described in this paper in the late twentieth century. To governments and officials, literacy practices may represent specific ways of

inculcating a resistant population into dominant ways of thought and action (as in the development of a 'literate mentality' in the Norman period and after). To some educationalists, literacy is about improving cognitive skills, developing rationality and abstract thought, and disembedding the "illiterate" from narrow and backward ways. To radical tutors and to groups of people in specific local situations, literacy work is often a means of resistance and consciousness raising. Literacy has been seen as a way of asserting local values against central hegemony. Two examples are indigenous populations resisting colonial influences, and class and community groups asserting their own cultural and class interests against those of a dominant and often central elite.

Seeing the conflicts among these different interest groups in this broader perspective, it is easier to understand the passion and conflict generated by otherwise apparently minor, technical debates about accreditation, evaluation, and incorporation; about teaching methods (learner centered or curriculum focused); or about assessment (central "objective" testing, local profiling, and ipsative assessment). These are debates and conflicts that are likely to recur in many countries as literacy provision becomes part of the agenda. Local philosophical and ideological debate will enter these domains in specific but charged ways and the apparently innocent task of overcoming "illiteracy" through appropriate resources and technical provision will become embedded in passionate ideological disagreement and public outcry.

In the United States, for instance, the literacy issue has become bound up with debates about cultural literacy and falling standards, fed by widely read academic books about the literacy crisis (Bloom, 1987; Hirsch, 1987; Kozol, 1985) and by newspaper and television coverage. In Slovenia, the issue has focused on unemployed youth who appear to lack the skills and the motivation to enter the workforce. The *Uzu* program there raises many of the same concerns about youth, culture, and alienation familiar in other western countries. The specific focus on unemployed youth as the major literacy problem is distinctive and certainly different from that described here for the United Kingdom.

In South Africa, on the other hand, the concern of adult educators today is how to make provision for a "lost generation," which missed out on education under apartheid but is needed in the economic rebuilding of the "new South Africa" (Prinsloo & Breier, in press). Debates rage at present about the degree of standardization appropriate in providing curriculum and assessment for these groups. Literacy activists who worked with NGOs during the apartheid era seem wedded to the kind of learner-centered, individual, and socially conscious approach evident in much of the United Kingdom literacy movement. Officials and educational administrators responsible for millions rather than dozens of potential students, favor the kinds of central procedures, evaluation, and accreditation recently emerging in the United Kingdom. In one sense, the same debates and conflicts are apparent; in another, each country takes a distinctive approach in the light of specific conditions and histories.

The term *literacy* in many programs, in both the industrial and developing worlds, has come to signify "illiteracy." That is, when agencies or educationalists say they are working in "literacy," it is taken to mean that they are working with so-called "illiterate" people, dealing with the problem of

"illiteracy"(cf. Street, 1991; Wagner, 1993). Agencies have cited the existence of large numbers of "illiterates" to quicken the conscience of funders and politicians. As in the first phase of the literacy campaign in the United Kingdom, the existence of a "literacy crisis" so challenges basic conceptions of the society as progressing and civilized (cf. Graff, 1979) that funds are often forthcoming to institute high profile programs.

This approach still persists in the United Kingdom in media coverage of literacy issues, if not in ALBSU's own literature: *The Sunday Times* (10.4.94), for instance, recently featured a "Culture Essay" entitled, in large print - "ILLITERACY." The piece was introduced by the assertion: "The British decline in literacy threatens areas as diverse as simple communication, individual self-esteem and economic productivity." Likewise, the *Independent Newspaper* (7.2.93) published a cover story under the large headline "Illiterate England."

Those involved in the field know that such claims of a "literacy crisis" or decline, often accompanied by unsubstantiated figures on "illiteracy," and the equally dramatic claims made for the outcomes of literacy acquisition and programs, are specious. The stigma of "illiteracy" is made worse by the publicity. False expectations are raised, and those responsible for training may be swamped by erratic fluctuations in demand, depending on when it suits politicians and the media to raise the issue.

The message of recent academic research on literacy, and indeed of much of the experience on the ground described above, has been of resistance to these dominant stereotypes of literacy and "illiteracy." Researchers instead attempt to demonstrate the variety and complexity of literacy practices in people's everyday lives. The conception of literacy as a set of atomized skills that should be largely the same everywhere, leads program developers and educationalists to the assumption that the same technical and context-free programs can deliver full literacy. If literacy practices are seen as multiple, varying with context whether historical, cultural, or economic, then single solutions cannot be packaged up and transported around the world. We need, instead, to attend to the specificity of experience in different places and times, to learn where there are similarities and to recognize what cannot be transferred. Detailed country accounts of the adult literacy movements of recent decades may represent one way of bringing this message home concretely as well as in terms of policy. From that perspective, the U.K. experience may have much to offer as a distinctive and telling case of national attempts to deal with the complex phenomenon of mass literacy in late twentieth century society.

# CONCLUSIONS

## GENERAL OVERVIEW

The findings of this research project on adult literacy in the United Kingdom lead in the direction of a more complex understanding of the meanings and uses of literacy in people's everyday lives and to interventions that are therefore more sensitive to local definitions of need. The United Kingdom was effectively the first industrialized nation to discover "illiteracy" and the finding there that

solutions could not be developed quickly through a single intervention or "quick fix" have applicability across the range of other industrialized countries as they make similar discoveries. Literacy difficulties persist among portions of the population as literacy needs change and the nature of work and education are transformed.

A further level of complexity lay in the recognition that literacy practices and literacy needs varied according to context, so that single solutions could not be packaged up and transported to different sites. Literacy programs are now being targeted more precisely to workplace literacy, family literacy, and community literacy for specific groups, rather than to literacy in general. Tensions and conflicts arose in the literacy programs that emerged to deal with the literacy difficulties of the British population. In particular, there were differences between those who advocated a centralized focus in designing curriculum, assessment, and materials and those who wanted a more local focus with learner-generated materials, community publishing, and teacher and learner research. Similarly, there has recently been disagreement over an emphasis on upskilling workers for new employment needs or addressing the basic needs of a broader population.

Media accounts of a literacy "crisis" and dramatic claims made for the outcomes of literacy acquisition often proved damaging to actual literacy programs: The stigma of "illiteracy" was made worse, false expectations were raised, and trainers swamped through erratic fluctuations in demand. The contradiction remained that such publicity was often one of the only ways of gaining public attention and generating government and agency funding.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Literacy programs, curricula, and assessment need to be addressed to the long term rather than to a "quick fix" and to the experience and needs of specific groups in different places and times. Provision needs to be broadened to provide multiple points of access and routes through literacy learning. Development towards accreditation and certification needs to be complemented by provision for basic needs and non-vocational interests.

Research of a qualitative as well as quantitative kind is needed to enable programs to be designed that are sensitive to local needs. Detailed country accounts of the adult literacy movements of recent decades in both the developed and developing worlds are needed to inform both policy and practice. Agencies and practitioners working in literacy should enroll the media as allies and brief them on the practical activities and real stories found in literacy programs to avoid the damage of superficial reporting. Finally, numeracy work needs to be addressed with the same degree of sensitivity to local variation and needs as literacy work.

## IMPLICATIONS

Addressing literacy practices in local sites and attending to the needs of diverse social groups raises considerable problems for program designers and funders. A generalized approach to literacy enables single texts and programs to be exported to different sites, facilitating economies of scale in both teacher training, materials, and publicity. The approach that follows from the experience of the adult literacy movement in the United Kingdom

described here will demand more targeted funding, greater flexibility in tutor training, and greater variety of materials, including provision for learner-generated materials and community publishing and for teacher and learner research. The justification for the greater expense and effort this requires lies in the documented failures of many centralized and top-down programs.

## ENDNOTES

1 Mitchell's essay on case studies explains the use of the "telling case." Rather than applying enumerative induction, as in much scientific and statistical research, as a means for generalizing and establishing the representativeness of social data, Mitchell advocates what he terms "analytical induction": "What the anthropologist using a case study to support an argument does is to show how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of particular circumstances. A good case study, therefore, enables the analyst to establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomena which previously were inelcutable. From this point of view, the search for a 'typical' case for analytic exposition is likely to be less fruitful than the search for a 'telling' case in which the particular circumstances surrounding a case, serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent . . . . Case studies used in this way are clearly more than 'apt illustrations.' Instead, they are means whereby general theory may be developed" (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239). The present paper is an attempt to apply these principles to data from the literacy campaign in the United Kingdom: It helps us see and understand connections and principles that generate questions and insights with regard to other programs.

2 The concepts of "literacy" and "illiteracy," and the way in which they have been defined in terms of a dichotomy or great divide (cf. Finnegan, 1988; Street, 1985), have been central in both education and development. In the United States some attempt is being made to avoid the demeaning implications of the term "illiteracy" and its associations with uncivilized, uneducated, backward, and so forth by referring intead to "low literacy" and in particular to "low-literate adults." Seen in the broader perspective offered by this paper, however, the concept of "low literate" does little to avoid the historical connotations of hierarchy and superiority that are problemmatized here. Moreover, in most of the literature referred to here, both from the United Kingdom and from Development Agencies, the term "illiteracy" was still used. For these reasons, the term "illiteracy" is used in this report but placed in quotation marks throughout this report.

3 The English Education system formally distinguishes between "primary education," "secondary education," "further education," and "higher education." Further education in this report refers to a level of educational provision, between secondary (equivalent to American high school) and higher education (mostly universities that award degrees). "Further Education Colleges" are those institutions that provide courses leading to qualifications in further education (FE). This designation has recently been given more formal status by the institution of a Further Education Funding Council, responsible for disbursing state funding to courses and institutions in FE, on analogy with the Higher Education Funding Council that mediates government funding to universities. The recent shifts in provision for adult education described below mean that much (though not all) of the adult literacy work in the United Kingdom is now undertaken through Further Education Colleges.

4 Wells' account both reinforces those cited above and also is of some historical interest in its own right, given his important role in the Literacy movement. "I started teaching in evening classes, what was called communication skills but was really a literacy class, in a very naive sense then, with quite large numbers of people, many of whom left fairly early on . . . Then I decided to move out of London and I applied for a job . . . called 'lecturer in adult illiteracy' in Birmingham. It was a kind of organiser job . . . There were two literacy programmes a one-to-one home tuition scheme, very much like Cambridge House and a small number of classes held in a special school, staffed largely by the teachers from a special school. These classes were recruiting teachers straight from school with hardly any

material, or any concept of approaches to adult work." He then became involved in the British Association of Settlements, campaigning from 1973-75. (Wells, 1994)

5 In 1987 the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit funded a research project at the University of Nottingham on the assessment of student progress in adult literacy, which attempted to bridge the gap between this view and the need in agencies and increasingly in government for evidence of outcomes and of "value for money." This project was not concerned with accreditation, but with developing student-centered assessment that could help students and tutors plan future work and at the same time enable the program to evaluate its effectiveness with regard to student progress (cf. *Open Letter* for accounts of similar developments in the Australian Adult Basic Education context). The project was required to develop practical materials supported by theory and research. As Research Officer, Deryn Holland set about examining the concepts contained within the title of the project: "The Assessment of Student Progress in Adult Literacy." How was the project to interpret the term "literacy?" How did students, teachers and administrators define progress? What did we know of adults as learners that should be incorporated into the project?

The project was conceived as action research, meaning that Holland, herself an experienced literacy teacher and organizer, would work closely with students, teachers, and literacy organizers in England and Wales attempting to answer these questions and develop and test new models for assessing student progress in literacy. The outcome was the Progress Profile (PP)—a set of documents in a three-ring binder for easy adaptation, that set a number of questions for the student to answer in consultation with the tutor and provided both a space for answers and a profile on their development. Questions such as "What do I want to achieve?" or "How far have I come?" were laid out on a matrix in which the student could shade in her progress. As well as facilitating student and tutor diagnosis, agencies and funders could observe quickly from a set of such profiles what had been achieved in a particular program. The evidence that Holland produced from the dissemination phase of the PP in the late 1980s provides an interesting insight into the underlying philosophy of learning that had developed amongst adult literacy tutors since the early campaign in the 1970s. Some teachers, she notes, expressed reluctance to consider even assessment of this open-ended and student-centered kind and responded to training sessions with statements like, "We haven't got time for assessment. The students come to learn, not do tests"; "Aren't they happy with what I'm doing?"; "I'm no good with statistics . . ."; "Our job is to teach, not to test." Resistance like this, according to Holland, reflects fear of traditional notions of assessment, which many tutors and their students see as a major cause of continuing literacy difficulties for adults. The reluctance of many British teachers documented here is a particular feature of the history and character of ABE in the United Kingdom that distinguishes it from that evident in other industrialized countries where similar literacy campaigns have been mounted in recent years. It represents a remarkably different response, for instance, from that in the United States where an instrument such as the Progress Profile looks very open-ended and "loose" compared with the traditional standardized tests such as the GED or the TABE (cf. Hill & Parry, 1994).

6 Wells provides a vivid description of a visit to a factory that brings out many of the issues currently facing literacy workers who are trying to develop workplace programmes in the United Kingdom:

> This factory I was at yesterday, we've been funding this project; there's absolutely no way they could fund it from their own resources, they just couldn't do it. They're small, they haven't got the expertise to do it in-house. These people are working from 7 in the morning till 7 at night, they're on piece-work, they're fighting against foreign competition. Now, I'm a strong believer, however you do it, that if you're going to get really serious work-place programmes going, then you're going to have to have some intervention by the State in that. In America where there are programmes going, there has again been lots of corporate money in those kind of things . . . . I think you've got to look at a way, at least initially, of helping small employers and trade unions do it, they can't do it otherwise, the economy is too tight for them. And I would have thought there was

> some evidence at least, that what the basic skills at work programmes have done, has helped some people who are difficult to reach in other ways. I mean the obvious example I guess is that in a bakery in north-west London, there's probably been more men from Asian communities recruited into language courses and literacy groups than elsewhere, and if you like it's another aspect of the work-place programme in terms of enabling people to get to basic skills provision that in other places just doesn't meet their requirements. I can remember the first ever stuff that was done in that area where employers were particularly resistant, they're much less resistant now because most have worked out, firstly that there's got to be some element of up-skilling of people, because of the changes in industry; secondly, that whereas the idea is, well you can make people redundant and recruit other people, in fact it's not very easy to do that. Directly the economy seemingly picks up, then you have skills gaps and skills. But I think employers both lack the expertise and secondly many employers, particularly in the medium and small companies, they lack the resources to do it. So what we're doing is trying to put into the hands of employers that are struggling to survive, the whole of the training agenda of this country in terms of a skilled work-force. Well that's a place where the Government's got to be involved; it's not a place where you can leave it . . . . You know, individual employers are going to look for next year and the year after perhaps, but not frankly for the year 2000, that's the Government's role. (Wells, 1994)

A further problem with responding to that kind of demand, where employers do come to recognize it, is in the supply of literacy tutors:

> . . . in general the number of practitioners who can actually look credible and operate in the work-place has been small. Many have gone in and operated almost entirely as though the context doesn't really matter whatsoever, and have not lasted. And have not lasted, not with the companies but with the people working, because they actually do work out that they've got to upskill to keep their jobs as much as anything, it's a hard world, and in some senses it's been the problem of who you refer employers to, because if they get referred to people who say, "Well what we'll do, send your employers down and they can infill one of our classes." Well unfortunately the retention rate tends to be extremely small . . . . And some of that, as you probably know, has been a philosophical disagreement with the whole concept of actually getting involved in industry, outside of in a sense the adult education world. I mean I understand the philosophy of that, but that does make it quite difficult. (Wells, 1994)

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